

ALLISON MOORER THE HARDEST PART

Songs are stories, and stories are just parts of some greater epic. The themes and plots all revolve around love, sex, struggle or death, unless we're talking about ditty songs, and Allison Moorer does not write or sing ditties.

The other thing about stories is that the ending is already decided. "The hardest part of living is loving, 'cause loving turns to leaving every time." That's not clever wordplay, only cold fact. One way or another, every time. With that much determined from the first song's first chorus, Moorer's *The Hardest Part* tells an intimate, soulfully rendered story of rough and desperate love.

Not that the ride isn't exhilarating. Moorer's alto falls across a song like Alabama dusk enveloping pine trees, and *The Hardest Part* finds her expanding on the lovely, plaintive sound of her critically heralded 1998 MCA Nashville debut disc, *Alabama Song*, achieving a fuller, more cinematic sweep of emotion while retaining a rooted, decidedly country feel. *The Hardest Part* opens in *Alabama Song*'s sonic vicinity, as the title track melds Tammy Wynette's hillbilly intensity with a sparse, bluegrass-tinged backing. By "No Next Time," though, Moorer sounds more like "Ode To Billie Joe"-era Bobbie Gentry fronting Neil Young's *Crazy Horse*. Except that Moorer never sounds like anyone but herself, a remarkable fact, given Nashville's preponderance of Ronstadt sound-alikes and would-be Twains (regrettably, that would be Shania, not Mark).

But then we were talking about the story, a story Moorer reveals in increments of sound and lyrics. It's a tale of real people, the kind who love and hate with equal, often simultaneous passion. That passion is underscored on *The Hardest Part* by strings that add weight and depth without sweetening, and related through songs that build on each other like chapters in a Southern novel.

Those songs - all written by Moorer and husband Butch Primm (co-producer Kenny Greenberg also assisted on "Bring Me All Your Lovin") - could stand by themselves, but in this case, scenes and lyrical lines suggest later scenes and lines. The midnight reachings of "Day You Said Goodbye" reappear in "Feeling That Feeling Again" and the decorated lies of the title song become the busted promises of "No Next Time" (brought to vivid life with the help of Nashville vocalist Lonesome Bob, who sings with all the power and aggressive conviction of Waylon Jennings).

It's an ambitious artistic endeavor, particularly for a singer-songwriter who had already developed a formula for success. Moorer's debut work earned her an Academy Award nomination (for "A Soft Place To Fall," included in Robert Redford's movie, *The Horse Whisperer*), exultant reviews in *Entertainment Weekly*, *Rolling Stone* and other publications and placement on numerous end-of-year Top 10 lists.

A replication of *Alabama Song*, however, was never an option. Moorer had an extraordinary story to tell about ordinary people, and she tells it without judgment, romanticism or denigration. As she sings in the album's opener, old sayings are untrustworthy: "absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder, yet out of sight doesn't mean out of mind."

The Hardest Part is a number of things, but most of all it's a love story, and, as we find at album's end, a true one. As a true one, it's ultimately a sad one, devoid of cuteness or vapidity, personal in its specifics yet universal in its scope.



A.TIF



B.TIF



C.TIF



D.TIF



ABW.TIF



BBW.TIF



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